

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



Common snipe

Uncommon Flush

The common snipe makes no bones about its intention when flushed from cover. The brownish shorebird, as its rasping *scaip!* call implies, is, well, escaping.

Typically, we spot the common snipe during unexpected flushes from a marsh edge. It zigzags in flight, making it a difficult target for whatever predator pursues it – including humans.

In the days of market hunting, the common snipe was a prized target because the status of the shotgunner who could consistently harvest this erratic-flying bird was raised.

There remains a hunting season for common snipe in North Dakota today, but few are bagged each fall. The small harvest may have something to do with the difficulty in properly identifying this bird as it resembles other shorebirds that aren't in season. The unwillingness by hunters to pull the trigger because of this doubt is a good thing.

The common snipe sports a long black bill, striped head and back, and white belly that is in contrast to its mottled brown appearance. Its legs are shorter than most other wading birds. The common snipe breeds in North Dakota from early May through mid-July. Males arrive first to breeding grounds to secure territories.

Things get interesting when the male decides the time is right to attract a mate. He does this through a wonderful acrobatic aerial display of dips and dives, topped off by a whistling-drumming-like sound produced by air passing through its tail feathers.

The female lays four eggs in a grass-lined depression that is well hidden. The chicks hatch in 18-20 days and fledge in about the same amount of time.

Common snipe prefer shallow, wet, grassy areas like you'd find in flooded meadows or along the edges of a marsh. The bird feeds on insects, worms and plant material that it roots out of the mud with its long bill.

These birds are typically seen feeding alone during the day, but during times of migration, it's more of a group effort as they travel in flocks under the cover of darkness.

Common snipe hang around North Dakota until about mid-October, or thereabouts. It's then that the snipe's shallow water habitat begins to freeze and the bird heads south to *scaip!* winter on the Northern Plains.

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